

# Successful School Turnarounds: Seven Steps for District Leaders

## WEBCAST SCRIPT

Slide #	Script
1	<p>Hello, this is Julie Kowal with Public Impact. Welcome to the webcast on steps that district leaders can take to support successful school turnarounds.</p> <p>The federal administration has called upon education leaders to change the lives of millions of children by dramatically improving the nation’s lowest-performing schools. After years of failure, these schools will require new types of intervention to finally turn around performance.</p>
2	<p>One strategy for rapidly improving performance is what is known outside of education as a “turnaround” – a quick, dramatic, sustained improvement in performance brought about by a driven leader who helps staff meet seemingly impossible goals.</p> <p>This type of change is different from what many have tried in the past. The changes are bigger and faster, and the press for success is relentless. Turnarounds will require different types of support and flexibility from district leaders.</p>
3	<p>In this webcast and the Center’s accompanying issue brief, <i>Successful School Turnarounds: Seven Steps for District Leaders</i>, we draw from the research base on successful turnarounds in education and other sectors to share seven steps that district leaders must take to support turnaround principals and maximize their chances of success.</p>
4	<p>Step #1: Commit to success.</p>
5	<p>Turnarounds are one of the only proven strategies for quickly achieving success in chronically low-performing organizations.</p> <p>But they can be difficult and controversial. In fact, across sectors, about 70 percent of major change efforts fail the first time. This makes sense, given the extremely challenging environments in which they’re tried.</p> <p>To be successful, district leaders must stay the course even when some schools don’t turn around on the first try. If a turnaround isn’t taking hold in a particular school, repeated attempts – with a new leader, for example – will be necessary. Only by making this commitment to try, and try again, can district leaders finally turn around all of their low-performing schools.</p>
6	<p>Step #2: Choose turnarounds for the right schools</p>
7	<p>In targeting schools for turnaround efforts, we need to look specifically at schools where student performance is extremely low and has been for years. We need to look at schools where incremental efforts to improve results – such as additional professional development, external coaching, or a new instructional program – have failed.</p> <p>Schools in this group need some kind of dramatic change – whether that’s a turnaround, starting fresh with all new leadership and staff, or closing the school and dispersing the students to higher performing schools.</p> <p>How can a district know whether turnaround is the right approach for a particular school? Consider a couple of additional factors.</p> <p>First, what is the local supply of turnaround leaders?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- In other sectors, successful turnarounds simply don’t happen without the right leader.</li><li>- Research suggests that turnaround principals are different from principals who are successful in higher-performing schools. Great principals in schools that have <i>not</i> faced chronic failure may not be the right match for a turnaround effort.</li><li>- In a moment we’ll discuss the characteristics that are unique to turnaround leaders. Districts will</li></ul>

want to use these characteristics to examine their talent pool – including teachers, assistant principals, principals and district administrators, as well as proven change leaders from non-education backgrounds – to get a sense of how many turnarounds are feasible in a given year.

Second, examine the capacity within the central office to oversee and support dramatic change.

- Successful turnaround principals must do many things differently to achieve success with students who are not learning. These changes may directly conflict with many districts’ standard district policies and practices.
- District leaders must commit to allowing new approaches – *especially* approaches that are different from standard policies – because these changes will be essential to support student learning in failing schools.

8 Step #3: Develop a pipeline of turnaround leaders.

9 As many as 70 percent of successful turnarounds begin with a new leader.

Districts can actively build their supply of turnaround principals through proactive recruitment, targeted selection and training, and strategic placement in turnaround schools.

- Recruitment efforts will most likely require new and alternate leadership pipelines. In the turnaround setting, vast experience in education is less important than the particular skills that are unique to the turnaround setting.
- Training programs for turnaround leaders might look like the handful of existing national programs – such as New Leaders for New Schools, the University of Virginia’s School Turnaround Specialist Program, or School Turnaround – that focus on principals in low-performing schools. Or districts can develop locally-based training programs to build the talent pool for the turnaround setting.
- Districts can extend their supply by placing turnaround leaders in schools for limited periods of time. Once turnaround principals have achieved success, districts can replace them with principals who are better suited for making continuous improvements, and then allow turnaround principals to transfer to other low-performing schools. Over time, this will make the best use of turnaround principals’ talents while maximizing their impact in the largest number of failing schools.

What should district leaders be looking for in the pool of turnaround leaders? Look for leaders who know *what action steps* to take and who have the *competencies* to take them.

10 Successful turnaround leaders have many characteristics that are different from successful leaders in already high-performing organizations.

The patterns of thinking, feeling, acting and speaking that are common to turnaround leaders are important to understand so that districts can identify principals with the best chance of success and begin to develop these capabilities in the broader talent pool.

The competencies of a turnaround leader include a drive for results – keen influence skills – problem solving ability – and confidence as a leader.

11 Turnaround leaders are their own breed. Across sectors, they take remarkably consistent *actions to make big changes fast*. These actions almost always begin with a series of early wins with big payoffs – such as dramatic increases in attendance rates and drops in disciplinary problems during the first few months of the school year. These wins are important in their own right, but they also build momentum for tougher changes down the line.

The other actions occur in a fast cycle that involves trying new tactics, quickly discarding failed strategies, and doing more of what works.

12 Step #4: Give leaders the “big yes.”

13 Turnaround leaders often achieve results by working around the rules and asking for forgiveness after their strategy has worked, rather than seeking permission beforehand.

One of the best ways for the district to support carefully selected, highly-competent principals in their turnaround efforts is to give them the “big yes” up-front.

The two most critical areas for flexibility are staffing and operations.

- Staff dismissals in turnarounds are typically small in number, and focused on employees who can't or won't make the types of radical changes that are necessary. To make targeted decisions about these staff members, turnaround principals need the freedom to hire and fire based on their specific turnaround goals. Districts may need to obtain waivers from tenure protections, seniority or “bumping” rights, and other job protections to give turnaround leaders this type of flexibility.
- Turnaround principals also need flexibility around scheduling, budgeting and other operational issues so that they can use time and money in service of their specific turnaround goals.
- Most successful turnarounds actually occur without additional resources. The spattering of initiatives that often accompany additional funding tends to hinder the turnaround by diluting the leader's attention. What's most critical is not necessarily more funding but the principal's discretion to allocate funding and people in ways that best meet students' needs.

#### 14 Step #5: Hold leaders accountable for results

15 A key factor in successful turnarounds is external pressure for speedy results. Districts must hold turnaround principals to high standards and set a short timeline for results.

- The research literature doesn't tell us the exact amount of time it should take to turn an organization around. What it does tell us is that fast, focused changes should be occurring in the first few months and substantial improvements should occur within the first year. District leaders should set clear expectations to achieve large, visible improvements in student learning in year one, with substantial additional improvements in year two.
- Ongoing monitoring and reporting of results also helps spur progress throughout the turnaround process. Districts should ensure that schools have the tools and technology to regularly analyze student learning and other data, such as attendance and discipline rates, so that they can make rapid changes based on what is and isn't working.
- Local media coverage, high-profile school visits, district press releases, and external research about results in turnaround schools can also instill urgency and drive principals and school staff to remain focused.

Finally, districts must commit to try again when an initial doesn't work. In other sectors, successful turnaround efforts are marked by strong improvements in the first year. One or two years without dramatic improvements in student achievement should prompt districts to retry major change – whether by hiring a new leader, changing district policies that hinder the turnarounds, closing the school, or other dramatic interventions. By quickly retrying major change in schools that are not initially successful, districts can turn a low initial success rate into a much higher *cumulative* success rate of turnarounds within a relatively short period of time.

#### 16 Step #6: Prioritize teacher hiring in turnaround schools

- 17 Staff replacements in a turnaround tend to be limited; but when they occur, principals must have a ready pool of qualified candidates to replace them.
- Special recruiting fairs for low-performing schools should be scheduled earlier in the year than fairs for other district schools to provide turnaround principals access to high-quality teacher applicants.
- Districts can also increase the pool by offering special performance incentives for teachers in turnaround schools who demonstrate great results with students.
- Because turnover and dismissals can happen at any point during a turnaround, districts should also maintain a pool of qualified replacements throughout the school year, so that new teachers can join turnaround schools when they are needed.
- 18 **Step #7: Proactively engage the community**
- 19 Turnaround efforts can be very controversial. Parents, community leaders, partner organizations and other stakeholders play a pivotal role in supporting or undermining turnaround efforts. There are three key strategies that districts can use to positively engage the community in turnarounds.
- Provide a stark view of the current failure by publicly acknowledging and taking responsibility for dismal achievement results in the schools that are slated for turnaround.
  - Communicate a positive vision of the future. This may include telling the stories of other schools that have turned around, explaining the nature of the turnaround strategy, being clear about the high performance expectations to which the school will be held, and noting the time span in which the community can expect to see results.
  - Talk about results. Early wins can serve as a powerful message that change is possible, and help undermine claims by those who oppose dramatic change. District leaders can publicize early successes to build and harness public opinion in support of turnarounds that are on-track.
- 20 These seven steps no doubt present a tall order for district leaders. Each is necessary to support the dramatic change required to turn around chronic low performance. But as district leaders begin their efforts, they should prioritize three steps in particular.
- 21 First, take action to build the pipeline of qualified turnaround principals. Experience has shown that true turnaround leaders are in short supply, and so vigorous recruitment and well-designed training programs will be necessary to meet the needs of all students.
- Second, put structures in place within the district office to make room for the deviations that turnaround schools require. Whether this takes the form of a “turnaround zone” or another design, it must provide real authority to turnaround principals – the “big yes” over staffing, budgeting and other operational decisions.
- And finally, commit to turnarounds as part of a relentless strategy to eliminate chronic low-performance from the district. Develop a plan to intervene in turnaround schools that are not successful the first time around. And prepare educators, parents and the broader community to expect continued vigilant efforts to turn around low-performing schools despite challenges that will undoubtedly come up.
- 22 Here is a selection of resources related to the topic of school turnarounds. More information is available in the full *Issue Brief* on this topic, available on the CCSRI website, [www.centerforcsri.org](http://www.centerforcsri.org).
- 23 Here is my contact information. The Public Impact and CCSRI websites are listed here if you would like to find more resources on this and other topics. Feel free to be in touch for more information.